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EXPLORING TRANSITIONS AND WORK-LIFE BALANCE IN THE DIGITAL ERA

Research in Progress

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Abstract

Scholars in the field of work-life balance (WLB) argue that individuals perform different role identities (e.g. parent, worker) within the different domains (e.g. family, work) of their life; and that these domains are separated by boundaries (Clark, 2000). There is an emerging view in the literature that information and communication technologies (ICTs) may influence both the way these boundaries operate and individuals' transitions across the different domains of their lives (Perrons, 2003). In this paper we report the preliminary results of a study in which we have explored the individual experience of transitioning, or switching, across role identities and domains in relation to ICTs. These preliminary findings are based on video and interview data with 10 social entrepreneurs. By the end of our research study, we expect to have recruited 45 participants from three different areas of experience, also including students and corporate employees. Our objectives through this study are to (a) improve our understanding around switching across role-identities and domains, and to (b) co-design tools that will help individuals manage their switching process. Following the preliminary analysis, we discuss our forthcoming steps and outline our study's expected contributions.

Keywords: work-life balance, switching, role-identity, transitions, information and communication technologies (ICTs)

1 Introduction, conceptual foundations and aims

There exists widespread recognition in the information systems (IS) and organizational literatures that information and communication technologies (ICTs) exert significant influence on individuals, teams, organizations, and societies (e.g. Panteli, 2009). Their use and cross-domain popularity gives rise to virtual environments that we are witnessing in a number of domains; for example, in organizations we see new configurations enabled by ICTs, such as global virtual teams (Chamakiotis et al., 2013), and in the field of education we see lectures being held virtually (Schmiedl et al., 2010). It has been argued

that ICTs challenge the concept of work-life balance (WLB) (e.g. Middleton, 2008), as individuals increasingly work remotely (Hislop, 2008), experience interruptions (Rennecker and Godwin, 2005), and yet, are expected to remain connected through the use of ICTs (Reinsch et al., 2008). For instance, although mobile devices—such as the BlackBerry—have been found to increase work productivity, they may also cause discontent among family and friends (Middleton, 2008), thus influencing individuals' WLB.

Boundary theory suggests that different domains (e.g. family, work) are embraced within individuals' lives and that individuals perform different roles (e.g. parent, worker) within each domain. The concept of role can be seen as a set of "*behavioural expectations associated with given positions in the social structure*" (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 18) and the literature on this topic sees roles as associated with both the life and the work domain (e.g. Rothbard et al., 2005). Burke (2006) argues that all individuals have several role-based identities, each of which subscribes to different rules. Ashforth (2000) claims that typically individuals perform physical and/or psychological movements (or 'role transitions', as he refers to them) between their different positions; and identifies macro (more radical and permanent in character) and micro transitions (when, for instance, shifting from a work- to a family-related role) role transitions. In our work, we view transitions/switches as physical or virtual movements between different roles (after Hall and Richter, 1988).

Different types of boundaries (e.g. geographical) separate these different domains (Clark, 2000). Following similar work (e.g. Ashforth et al., 2000), we view boundaries as anything that influences the perimeter or scope of a role or domain, and we consider them in relationship with their degree of flexibility and permeability. Interestingly, scholars speak about the pervasive character of ICTs and the effects this may have on boundaries. For example, MacCormick et al. (2012) argue that the use of smartphones may give rise to new boundaries or may also render existing boundaries permeable. Recent literature reveals that it is to a large extent personal experience that characterizes the influence that ICTs have on boundaries and on WLB. For example, research into teleworkers working from home reveals that some tend to segment work- and home-related activities, while others blend the two (Fonner and Stache, 2012). Similarly, Golden and Geisler (2007) indicate that personal digital assistants (PDAs) can be used for both segmentation and integration of work- and personal-life. On the other hand, Ruppel et al. (2013) found, in their study of global virtual team members, that senior members prioritized ICTs that allowed them to multitask and maintain boundaries between work and life over ICTs that would please their work colleagues. Koch et al. (2012) recognize that work-life boundaries are oftentimes blurred in the digital era. They argue that use of specific ICTs that permeate the boundaries between personal and work-related activities creates positive emotions that in turn lead to a sense of well-being and also increase organizational commitment.

The WLB literature is a rich one, offering useful insights on numerous issues, including: the relationship between gender equality, flexible working hours, and WLB (Smithson and Stokoe, 2005); the reasons that drive individuals to perform home- and leisure-related activities while at work (D'Abate, 2005); the relationship between technology-assisted supplemental work (e.g. BlackBerry) and work-family conflict (Fenner and Renn, 2009); WLB and parenthood (Gatrell et al., 2013); and telework, controlling hours and WLB (e.g. Maruyama et al., 2009). For example, the latter study argues that the most critical factor for good WLB among teleworkers is the ability to have some control over one's working hours, while issues of gender and parenthood were not found to be significant. In a similar vein, Fenner and Renn (2009) find that while ICTs may indeed contribute to work-to-family conflict, time management skills can act as boundaries, moderating the negative effects of ICTs on WLB. However, scholars have challenged the notion of WLB. For instance, Eikhof et al. (2007) critique this literature for making unwarranted assumptions—such as that life is equated to childcare or that working long hours is assumed to be a very negative undertaking. These scholars highlight that WLB is a complex notion and urge researchers to reconceptualize it taking into consideration the assumptions that the extant WLB literature is premised on.

In this paper, we draw our conceptual foundations from the literature on WLB in our quest to start exploring the influence ICTs exert on work-life boundaries, and transitions, or switches, across role-identities (e.g. parent, worker) and domains (e.g. family, work). Though we recognize the depth and richness of this literature, which we are planning to incorporate at the later stages of our research, in this short paper we focus on selected concepts that guided our research at its early stages. More specifically, we argue that though there is acknowledgement that ICTs have an influence on issues of WLB, our understanding of the personal switching experience across boundaries, role-identities and domains remains limited. Our overall aim is therefore to start bridging this knowledge gap by understanding whether ICTs support the management of more flexible transitions—creating more permeable boundaries and a less segmented persona—or whether they encourage leakage across boundaries and difficult identity management tasks. In what follows, we present the methodological approach we adopted for our study in order to improve our understanding around switching. Ultimately, the findings from our study will be used to co-design tools that will help individuals manage their switching process. This latter aim forms part of the agenda of a wider, multidisciplinary research project, which we do not discuss in this paper. Here, we report on our preliminary analysis of data collected from one of the groups that have taken part in our study, which we explain below. Finally, we outline our forthcoming steps and expected contributions.

2 Methodology

Our methodological approach is an innovative one, involving a video study and follow-up interviews with each participant (Henry and Fetters, 2012). In what follows, we present our participants, discuss their suitability for our study, and explain how the video and interview studies are being conducted.

2.1 Participants: characteristics and recruitment process

Our full study will involve 45 participants drawn from three different groups: 15 social entrepreneurs, 15 students, and 15 corporate employees. We focus these three different groups for a number of reasons. We argue that social entrepreneurs are suitable participants, because they are often on the go; have no standard working hours or location from which they work; and use ICTs to remain connected to the people they work with. As such, their work-life boundaries are likely to be highly permeable. Further, social entrepreneurs are pursuing a social impact agenda, to which they may feel very committed, and they may work closely with their personal social network in pursuing their work goals. Our student participants are UK nationals between 18 and 25 years old, enrolled in full-time education in the UK, while the characteristics of our corporate participants have yet to be decided. Our student participants are homogeneous in terms of culture and nationality, allowing us to improve our understanding of the issues under study within a specific cultural and national context. Further, we have aimed for differences between the different groups in order to enable comparisons between them. For example, the student participants are significantly younger than the social entrepreneurs who have taken part in our study. Overall, we have aimed to have both male and female participants, but, due to the small number of participants, we do not intend to make gender comparisons.

Currently (30 March 2014), we have conducted a pilot study with 11 academic participants, and 10 social entrepreneurs and 11 students have completed both video diaries and interviews. In this paper, however, we report on our findings from our preliminary analysis of the data from the 10 social entrepreneurs (see Table 1 for their characteristics).

Social entrepreneurs were recruited via a range of methods, involving direct email to members of social enterprise networks based in specific geographical UK locations, circulating the recruitment flyer to a variety of organizations that host entrepreneurs, personal contacts of research team members,

and dissemination via the social media accounts of a number of UK-based social enterprise membership organizations and the Twitter account of the research project.

Group	Participant	Age Group	Gender	Nationality	Family Situation
Social Entrepreneurs	Allan	25-34	M	Austrian/ Polish	Living with friends
	Cressida	55-64	F	UK	Living with child(ren)
	David	35-44	M	UK	Living with partner and child(ren)
	Jane	45-54	F	UK	Living with child(ren)
	Jez	45-54	M	UK	Living alone
	Mark	25-34	M	French/UK	Living alone
	Michael	55-64	M	UK	Living alone
	Rachel	35-44	F	UK	Living with partner and child(ren)
	Sally	45-54	F	UK	Living with partner and child(ren)
	Simon	45-54	M	UK	Living with partner and child(ren)

Table 1. *Participants' Characteristics: The Social Entrepreneurs*

2.2 The video study

Prior to attending the briefing, participants were sent an information sheet which outlined the wider research project, its aims, and what their involvement would entail. Participants were briefed mostly in a face-to-face (F2F) meeting when instructions for keeping the video diary and a short demonstration of the key functions of the camcorder (pre-loaded with a 32GB memory card) were provided. Participants were asked to sign a consent form indicating their willingness to take part in the study. A minority of briefings were conducted via Skype. Copies of the presentation and all other participant documentation were also available to download from the project website which additionally included a section on FAQs. The research team also maintained a dedicated project email account to which the participants could direct queries.

Participants were asked to undertake a week's 'video diary' that focused on their different roles in the various domains of their lives and how they switched (or tried to switch) between them, in both their digital and physical worlds. The approach required them to capture in real time what they saw in front of them rather than to narrate these switches retrospectively, though it was explained this would be a useful supplement to switches that were too difficult to capture as they happened. They were advised to avoid filming anything of a confidential, sensitive or highly personal nature or in places of high security. On completion of filming, the participants returned the camcorders and their data and took part in a short telephone debrief in which they were asked about the experience of taking part in the video study. In the pilot study, participants were also asked more detailed questions about the methodology and the equipment. Following feedback from the pilot study, participants in the main study (e.g. social entrepreneurs) were asked to retain a copy of their video data for them to review prior to a later F2F interview.

The video data were analysed through thematic using the phases identified by Braun and Clark (2006): familiarization with data; generation of initial codes; search for themes; revision of themes; definition and naming of themes; and writing-up. One of the differences between video and interview data is that the researcher is not present at the moment of data creation or collection so the material is 'new' making the first stage (familiarization with data) quite an extended undertaking. This was conducted primarily by one member of the research team and included the transcription of limited segments of audio data. For the most part, the videos were analysed in their native state.

2.3 The interview study

Though 13 social entrepreneurs have currently completed the video study, 10 of them, whom we are focusing on here (see Table 1 above), have completed both the video and the interview studies. The aim of conducting the interviews is to consider the participants' perceptions of switching across role-identities and domains in relation to their use of ICTs. The interviews were conducted in a meeting room at a University, providing a friendly, quiet and confidential environment for the participants to share their experiences. Consent for the interviews was given prior to the video study, discussed in the earlier section, by each participant, allowing us also to record each interview using a digital audio recorder. The interviews have been designed to last around one hour and are semi-structured in nature (Wengraf, 2001), playing a twofold role, which we explain next.

On the one hand, a generic interview set of questions was developed, involving questions around the interviewees' background, sense of WLB, and switching experience. This entailed open-ended questions to reduce research bias on the part of the interviewer and followed a narrative approach (Maitlis, 2012), encouraging participants to share their views and experiences about the aforementioned issues. On the other hand, the interviewees were also asked to elaborate on a selection of their own videos, which we incorporated in each interview. Specifically, 3-5 video excerpts were selected and incorporated in each interview by the research team. The criteria used for video excerpt selection and inclusion were as follows: unplanned switches (e.g. interruptions); routinized and/or habitual switches; switches between different technologies or applications; switches between the virtual and physical worlds; instances where switching is found to be problematic (difficult to switch, not fully switched); instances where switching appears to have taken place but not acknowledged; instances where switching is related to participant identity; instances of innovative or novel ways of managing switches.

Following the interviews, each participant is sent a short questionnaire focusing on demographical information (e.g. age group), which we have shown in Table 1 above. The 10 interviews we have conducted so far have been professionally transcribed and are currently being analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2006) on QSR NVivo 10 (a software program for qualitative research), following the steps used for our analysis of the video data, explained in the previous section. The different types of data collected for this study (video and interview data) will not be used for triangulation, but rather for completeness purposes, in our quest to sketch a richer picture of the phenomenon under study and in line with the principles of interpretivism in qualitative research (Tobin and Begley, 2004).

3 Preliminary findings and analysis

Our preliminary analysis of the video and interview data of the 10 social entrepreneurs presented in Table 1 hints at a number of themes, which we present in two broad categories: (a) WLB: perceptions, approaches and boundaries; and (b) Transitions, switches and ICTs. The first category includes such themes as 'managing WLB', 'WLB control', 'prioritization', 'WLB organization' and 'WLB breakdown'. The second category includes themes related to 'switching off', 'managing switches', 'constant connectivity', and 'switching between the virtual and the corporeal world'. In what follows, we present our analysis around the two broad categories with illustrations from the interview and video data.

Work-life balance: Perceptions, approaches and boundaries

Our findings so far offer useful insights on WLB, varying from different perceptions and approaches, through to issues of boundaries and control. The notion of WLB was challenged by our participants. Several social entrepreneurs argued that WLB may not be necessary if one enjoys what one does:

"Why do you need a work life balance if you're enjoying what you're doing." (Mark, interview data)

Others, not dissimilarly, claimed that in a digital era, when most of one's time is spent in front of a PC, life is mostly work-centred, problematizing thereby the relevance of WLB:

"Most of this time is spent working on our website...getting new members is associated partly with our friends...I'm exchanging with them on communities and chats and talking to them and reminding them to come back to website to drive the activity. Same with our parents, the topic is the enterprise." (Allan, video data)

In fact, the use of ICTs in particular was found to give rise to a virtual environment in which participants engage in both personal and work-related activities simultaneously. Figure 1, for instance, shows how a participant views her personal and work calendar on the same screen (left screenshot); and how another participant works on his PC while listening to the match in the background.

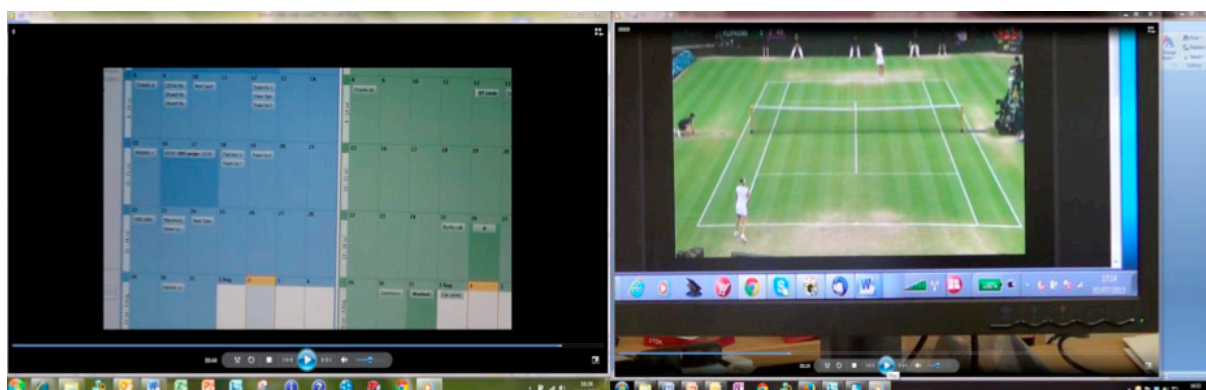


Figure 1. Screenshots of participants' videos showing how they engage in activities from different domains (e.g. personal, work-related) simultaneously.

Interestingly, however, the participants were found to construct boundaries between their different roles, activities and domains. Most participants made some reference to the importance of habits and routines in helping maintain boundaries. Sally, for instance, is conscious about the way she organizes her digital work, by setting time apart for specific digital activities, and also recognizes the role played by routines in discerning her work- from home-related activities:

"So, I am trying to look at setting aside certain times for checking my emails and things like that but generally it's just like get up, get the kids out the door, got in the office, sit down and..." (Sally, interview data)

Technology was also found to play a role in constructing boundaries between work and life. As, for example, the quote below suggests, different devices are used for different purposes:

"The idea was to have my work, my charity work on the work laptop and have all my personal stuff on the other laptop." (Mark, interview data)

Transitions, switches and ICTs

Our analysis posits different types of switches performed by our participants; some were related to the virtual world and some to the corporeal world. For example, technology was found to enable micro-switches:

"... As much as I try to stay with something I'm doing, sometimes I can't. So things like having my iPad in the kitchen when I'm cooking is really, really handy." (Jane, interview data)

The participant above went on to explain that using her iPad for work-related activities while engaging in home-related activities on a day when she worked from home improved her productivity by helping her jot down ideas directly when they came to her mind whatever her actual activity.

While a large part of our data suggest that technology plays an important part in maintaining both work-life boundaries and also in managing some transitions efficiently, we also found that ICTs promote a sense of constant connectivity which influences our participants' perception of WLB. Some, for example, claimed that constant connectivity influences their performance levels at work:

"I thought at least 'give yourself some time to think' because when you are continuously connected, you're reacting only, it's hard to be very proactive and create." (Allan, interview data)

This constant connectivity is what urged some participants to transition from the virtual to the corporeal world. As Cressida put it,

"[Going to the park] offers an alternative place to think and when I walk I can solve problems and think about problems in a different way." (Cressida, video data, Figure 2)

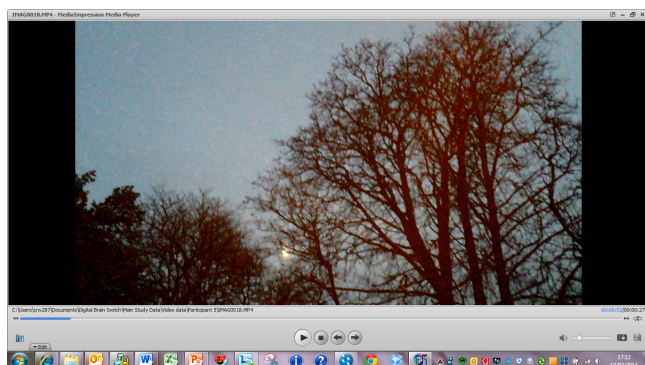


Figure 2. Screenshot of video indicating a participant's switch from the virtual to the corporeal world.

4 Forthcoming steps and expected contributions

In the previous section, we discussed some themes in two broad categories that have emerged from our analysis so far. Currently, we are recruiting participants from all three groups in order to reach our target of 45. We anticipate that once the video and interview data from all three groups will have been collected and analysed, an improved understanding of the personal switching process will be attained, in particular relation to the use of ICTs. This will inform relevant literature in the fields of both IS and WLB, in particular literature focusing on the influence of ICTs on issues of WLB, role-identity, switches, and boundary management. For example, our preliminary findings extend extant WLB literature (e.g. Eikhof et al., 2007) urging researchers to reconceptualize WLB, by showing that (a) work and personal life may not necessarily be two entirely separate domains within the community of social entrepreneurs; and that (b) ICTs may give rise to a virtual environment in which individuals engage in both personal and work-related activities simultaneously. Given also that data from different groups (i.e. social entrepreneurs, students, corporate employees) are being collected, commonalities and differences in the emergent themes are expected to be unpacked. Finally, as was briefly mentioned earlier, our main study constitutes part of a wider multidisciplinary study, in which researchers from the field of computer science will use our qualitative data to develop technologies that will assist individuals in managing their switching process. Ultimately, and further to our expected theoretical contributions, our findings are expected to be of value to practitioners and have a wider impact once these technologies have been developed.

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